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ABSTRACT

This paper provides practical description, examples, and step-by-step guidelines for using portfolio assessment. Both advantages and limitations of portfolio assessment are offered, although the authors clearly argue for the benefits of using portfolios to evaluate learning. Contains a sample format for holistic grading of a portfolio. (Author/RS)

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Using Portfolios to Assess Learning

by Tara J. Fenwick and Jim Parsons

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Using Portfolios to Assess Learning

Interest in using portfolio assessments to provide authentic, student-centered evaluation is growing. Portfolio evaluation has been explored in many instructional contexts -- from elementary schooling (Lamme and Hysmith, 1991; Hebert, 1992) to the evaluation of professional performance (Bosetti, 1995). Using portfolios to assess learning has many benefits; still, careful planning, patience, and flexibility are essential. This paper provides an introduction to portfolio assessment, describing practical suggestions for its implementation.

What is portfolio assessment?

In a social studies classroom, a portfolio would probably be a folder or binder, assembled by the student, containing samples of student work collected over a specified time. Items would reflect the course content and might include: formal written papers, problem solutions, essays, homework, artwork, videotapes of student presentations, journal entries, personal responses to questions, current event reports, in-class projects, exams or quizzes, Internet exercises, reports of student performance by peers, etc. -- whatever teachers or students agree demonstrate that learning has occurred.

Using portfolios is challenging, and refining them takes time. There is no one best way. Teachers who use portfolios must develop expectations, guidelines, and assessment criteria for course objectives and student needs. Samples of student work must be used to establish grades, and some teachers have found that if they do not attach grades to portfolios, students will not take portfolio assessment seriously.

Using portfolios

The following steps may help social studies teachers use portfolios:

1. Decide what should be collected, by whom, and when. Where will portfolios be kept? How will items be evaluated? Teachers should be prepared to modify initial plans as students actually use portfolios. Experienced teachers offer two suggestions: (1) Limit the number of products in a portfolio and (2) Combine portfolios with traditional assessments like tests and assignments.

2. Give students up-front help. Be clear about what goes in a portfolio, carefully balancing your directions with students' free choice. Show samples and sell students on the benefits of portfolios. Help them know what to expect. Confusion, ambiguity, and unclear goals are natural as students learn to build portfolios. Demonstrate your willingness to adapt expectations as portfolios grow.

3. Work with students throughout the process. Give students general expectations for portfolio contents, then help them as they collect. Students need help focusing and selecting, especially if they have never built portfolios. Most need confirmation that their choices meet expectations. Allowing students to share portfolios and talk about the collection of items helps.

4. Hold periodic student conferences. Some teachers suggest two formal portfolio conferences per student, one at mid-point and the second at the end. During conferences, students show teachers their portfolios, discussing their work, perhaps the background and reasons for choices, and assess the personal learning demonstrated by items.

5. Grade portfolios holistically. Grading each portfolio item then adding marks for a final grade is difficult. First, different items dictate different grades; and, because items in one portfolio differ from items in another, item-by-item grading is counter-productive. Second, such grading is time-consuming. Holistic marking helps assess particular items in the portfolio with the learning demonstrated and the evidence of students' insight and self-assessment of learning shown in conferences. The result is a better understanding of the learning represented in the portfolio. As teachers see the portfolios students are developing and sharing with each other, more helpful criteria and assessment indicators will emerge.

6. Spend time thoughtfully responding to students' portfolios and the self-evaluations of the items they choose. Feedback throughout the collection process helps students clarify the purpose of the portfolio for their own learning.

Portfolio Assessment

Sample format for holistic grading a portfolio. This format was developed as a generic portfolio assessment that shows student growth.

Name _____ *Date* _____

1 = Dependent 2 = Limited 3 = Adequate 4 = Competent 5 = Proficient 6 = Superior

(1) Preparation of Portfolio 1 2 3 4 5 6 Weighting

_____

(a) Portfolio is complete (contains all required material).
(b) Items are appropriately dated, identified, and organized.
(c) Overall presentation shows care and thought.
Comments:

(2) Documentation of Growth 1 2 3 4 5 6 Weighting

_____

(a) Work samples reflect growth in particular areas.
(b) Portfolio items are chosen thoughtfully and purposefully.
(c) Portfolio demonstrates achievement in significant areas of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.
(d) Portfolio presentation demonstrates an awareness of identified needs.
Comments:

(3) Evaluation of Selected Item(s) 1 2 3 4 5 6 Weighting

_____

(a) Overall quality:
(b) Thoughtfulness (detail, clarity, originality, development):
(c) Appropriateness of form:
(d) Relationship of form and content:
(e) Use of details in presentation to enhance relevant criteria:
Comments:

(4) Quality of Self Evaluation demonstrated in conferences 1 2 3 4 5 6 Weighting

_____

(a) Comments examine products as well as learning processes and strategies.
(b) Comments show evidence of revisiting specific work samples.
(c) Comments show self-awareness and insight into behavior, attitudes, values, and beliefs.
(d) Comments identify areas for further improvement and set directions for action and learning.
Comments:

Benefits of using portfolios

1. Portfolios show student growth over time. They provide continuity, integration, and a record of overall progress.

2. Portfolios involve students in the evaluation of their own learning. When students work to evaluate their own learning, their responsibility increases. Creating a portfolio moves students towards self-evaluation.

3. Portfolios show the process of learning, not just the outcomes. Samples collected at various times reflect the students' stages of learning. Seeing these increments is fascinating. Students discover more about their own learning, and motivation for finishing projects usually increases when students see evidence of their own progress.

4. Portfolios build student confidence. Teachers commonly report that using portfolios builds student self-esteem. An accumulated folder of personal accomplishments becomes visible proof of learning.

5. Portfolios demonstrate interconnected knowledge and skills. Portfolios authentically reflect student ability and achievement.

6. Portfolios are a learning experience. Students who assemble a portfolio must consider their learning, evaluate products, make selections, and rationalize choices. This process raises awareness. As portfolios grow, they shape student goals. Insights revealed by assembling a portfolio shape the student's approach to learning.

7. Portfolios may help students find employment. Materials in a portfolio may be translated into resumes. Some employers ask applicants to provide work samples. Others can be persuaded by the quality of work within a portfolio.

8. Portfolio assessment may reveal instructional gaps -- for example, that students can not use the library or conduct research. Teachers can use portfolio information to reshape instruction.

9. Portfolios aid teacher development and promote collaborative teaching, allowing staffs to develop criteria and scoring tools together, agree on items for inclusion, and change instruction. Portfolios may help teachers reexamine instructional goals and communicate these clearly to each other and to students.

Potential concerns using portfolios

1. Some teachers wonder how portfolios can measure student achievement validly or reliably. Constructs like "validity" and "reliability" assume that learning outcomes should be pre-determined and measured against external standards. Portfolios assume that learning unfolds differently for each student. Portfolios help students reveal unique and novel skills, abilities, and understandings. In courses where performance standards must be pre-determined and met, portfolios should be supplemented with other assessment tools.

2. Portfolios are often time-consuming to evaluate. Still, some teachers spend more time writing comments on essays than holistically grading portfolios. Some teachers find conferencing with students valuable

instruction, not "extra" marking. Learning to use any new assessment is time-consuming.

3. Portfolios contain disparate items, which can make evaluation difficult. The more flexible the specifications for students' portfolios, the more thought needed to evaluate student work. How can a piece of reflective writing, a beautifully completed chart, and a letter of protest to a business which pollutes be compared?

4. Students are sometimes skeptical about using portfolios. They may not know what to do, and fear the time involved. Some are uncomfortable with self-evaluation and decision-making. Some find it difficult to complete products that are not "handed-in" for immediate grading. Students need time to become comfortable with the responsibility they must assume in portfolio assessment. They also need support, suggestions, early feedback, patience, and acceptance as they struggle with their choices.

Maximizing Portfolio Effectiveness

The following six strategies can help maximize the effectiveness of portfolios:

1. define the purpose of the portfolio
2. teach students to self-reflect
3. structure portfolio reviews by the students
4. make time for peer evaluation
5. share portfolios with students regularly
6. give yourself time to become comfortable with portfolio use

Conclusion

Portfolios offer authentic assessment, grounded in students' everyday problems, insights, and practical dilemmas. Portfolios demand that students responsibly create, consider, and evaluate learning. And, portfolios focus on both learning process and outcomes. However, assembling a portfolio is a significant departure from the routine of teacher-designed assignments and tests students expect. Creating a portfolio requires new skills, critical reflection, and self-analysis. While students develop these skills as they build portfolios, they need assistance and patience as they work.

For teachers, portfolio assessment poses difficult questions: What products demonstrate learning, and what learning is represented? How can products be interpreted? How can different products -- representing different content in different forms for different purposes -- be evaluated meaningfully? How can numerical grades be assigned? What information about students, their histories, and learning is critical to understanding and evaluating a portfolio?

Teachers who have used portfolios note that these are not impossible questions. Portfolios are workable, especially as teachers find practical ways to solve problems raised by portfolios. In fact, these issues open dialogue about fundamental questions like what it means to learn, how learning can be demonstrated and judged, and the role of an teacher in a student's learning.

Portfolio assessment, when planned and implemented thoughtfully, promotes students' personal and educational development, strengthens the application

of course material, encourages meaningful conversation between teachers and students, and helps students and teachers re-examine their work. The decision to use portfolios is, in part, a choice to forego control and management-by-measurement and to embrace emergent, dynamic methods of evaluation that entwine judgment with the learning process itself.

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